

BOOK REVIEWS

Powe, F. Douglas Jr., and Jasmine Rose Smothers. *Not Safe for Church: Ten Commandments for Reaching New Generations*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015. 144 pp. \$16.99.

Cory L. Seibel holds the Ph.D. in Practical Theology from the University of Pretoria, the M.Th. in Applied Theology from the University of Wales, and a B.S. in Religion from Liberty University. He currently serves as Point Pastor at Central Baptist Church in Edmonton, Alberta, and is an adjunct instructor for Tabor College, Kansas, and Fresno Pacific University, California.

The title of this book presents a bold claim—its contents are “NSFC! Not Safe for Church!” (ix). Those who endeavor to read this book should do so at their own risk, its authors caution, because it is likely to cause them to “think and act differently” (ix). In many congregations, thinking and acting in new ways is simply not perceived to be safe, the authors assert. Drawing upon the biblical account of Caleb and Joshua and the spy journey into the Promised Land, they suggest that many congregations “are like the majority report of the spies who are afraid to act” (x–xi).

This aversion to risk has caused many congregations to become ineffective in reaching and retaining the members of today’s younger generations, which Powe and Smothers describe as the “post-civil rights generations.” The authors’ central objective in this book is to invite congregations to do exactly what they find so threatening, to “think and act differently when it comes to reaching post-civil rights generations (those born after 1961)” (xi). They desire to see the church move forward into “a willingness to take

risks and to open our minds to new ideas that will cause us to do things differently” (xi). This would enable congregations to resemble Caleb and Joshua, “not only seeing the possibilities, but being willing to act on the possibilities” (xi).

Both authors bring distinctive experience and insight to this collaborative effort. Powe is the James C. Logan Chair in Evangelism and Professor of Urban Ministry at Wesley Theological Seminary, where he also serves as Associate Director of the Center for the Missional Church. He previously authored, *New Wine, New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Abingdon Press, 2012). Smothers is Associate Director of Connectional Ministries of the North Georgia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Powe and Smothers organize their material into ten “commandments” (covenant practices) that can help congregations to think and act differently. As they note, “These are practices that congregations can engage in together that will move them forward in a positive manner” (xiv). Each chapter is devoted to exploring one of these commandments, which Powe and Smothers creatively introduce by employing memorable phrases from contemporary hip hop culture. While all ten of these commandments focus on themes that are of genuine significance to the life of the church today, the most notable chapters will be highlighted briefly here.

The first commandment introduced by Powe and Smothers, “Thou Shall Chill,” provides the foundation for all that follows. The authors suggest that congregations often assume themselves to be embroiled in some sort of struggle with the post-civil rights generations and unchurched individuals for the survival of the church. However, they note, this fight is one in which their “opponents” are not actually engaged or interested. Congregations need to recognize that the battle over the church’s future is one in which they are merely struggling against themselves. As the authors suggest, “It is only when congregations are willing to let go that new possibilities can occur” (4).

A striking call to authenticity is advanced in the chapter devoted to the second commandment, “Thou Shall Not Front.” The authors assert that congregations’ reliance on church growth strategies has caused many to lose sight of “the fact that God has gifted every congregation in different ways in order to serve in their context authentically” (15). They believe that members of the younger generations desire to encounter authenticity in the church. An authentic church, they assert, will be clear, decisive, discriminating, and uncompromising about its mission (20). It will be honest about its strengths and weaknesses, not afraid to share the stories and scars from its own failures (21). The authors also suggest that authenticity requires honesty, respect, and consistent communication (24).

The chapters covering commandments four through seven identify crucial changes that churches must make in their approach to ministry in order to engage members of the post-civil rights generations more effectively.

Commandment four, “Thou Shall Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself,” focuses on the church’s need to implement approaches to ministry that have true potential to include young adults. “Thou Shall Learn How We Roll,” the fifth commandment, promotes the creation of multiple, creative, and easily accessible entry points into the faith community. Commandment seven, “Thou Shall Get Game,” explores the importance of congregations engaging their communities in mission, one respect in which the post-civil rights generations often are “ahead of the church because they ‘got game’ when it comes to serving others” (94).

The final two commandments encourage churches to consider their posture toward the future. “Thou Shall Sample,” the ninth commandment, encourages congregations to integrate their established traditions with creative, fresh expressions of ministry. As Powe and Smothers express, “A good sample maintains the integrity of both the old and the new so that the current audience experiences something fresh” (119). The tenth commandment, “Thou Shall Represent,” examines the reality that many young adults are “moving on in their future without the church” because they are tired of being told that they must wait before contributing significantly to the church’s life (125). The authors provide an urgent call for the church to embrace innovation and, in doing so, to see these capable and insightful members of the post-civil rights generations as key partners in the process of innovating.

Not Safe for Church makes a noteworthy contribution to the broader discussion of churches’ efforts to reach emerging generations today. Too few resources have been published that enable us to explore this issue from a distinctively African-American perspective. In fact, the authors’ choice to employ “post-civil rights generations” to describe contemporary young adults is a significant indicator of the unique perspective that they bring to this topic. Most authors who have addressed this subject from within predominantly Caucasian contexts have assumed terms like “postmodern” or “post-Christian” to adequately capture the totality of the generational changes we have observed in recent decades. Powe and Smothers help us to consider this issue differently. Their use of vocabulary from hip-hop culture to describe the challenges facing congregations also brings creativity and fresh insight to this discussion.

A few other strengths of this book deserve to be mentioned here. First, the authors offer a thoughtful challenge to some popular assumptions about church growth methodology. Their critique of how the Homogeneous Unit Principle has been appropriated in the American context (61) is especially noteworthy. Second, Powe and Smothers effectively employ biblical stories as illustrative material. For example, their telling of the Old Testament stories of Joseph (72–75) and David (100–105) is insightful and vividly imaginative. Third, the fact that these authors write from within the “connectional” United Methodist tradition enables them to highlight issues that

authors from free church traditions would likely neglect. This perspective will be especially helpful to readers who serve in similar contexts.

In addition to these strengths, there also are a few aspects of *Not Safe for Church* that are worthy of critique. For example, while Powe and Smothers credibly challenge some church growth principles and make a clear case for a missional understanding of the church as a *sent* community, they at times reinforce attractional assumptions in ways that do not seem altogether helpful in advancing their overall argument (for example, their treatment of contemporary worship on page 4). Also, while the authors devote chapter two to describing the sort of authenticity that the church must embody in order to be perceived as credible by members of the post-civil rights generations, the theme of humility is notably absent. Most studies of these generations suggest that humility is one of the attributes that they most desire to encounter in the church and one of the qualities that they most often find notably absent.

The description Powe and Smothers provide of the post-civil rights generations is generally on target. However, at a few points, their characterization of the members of the Millennial generation is somewhat lacking in sufficient nuance or clarity. In addition, the authors consistently treat the “post-civil rights generations” as an umbrella category, which is certainly valid. However, when they do introduce generation-specific material, they focus rather exclusively on Millennials. While the authors clearly mean “post-civil rights generations” to encompass Generation Xers, they do not incorporate any specific material devoted to examining Generation X as a distinct cohort. This seems like a bit of an oversight. Since Xers differ from Millennials in some key respects, the inclusion of material on this generation would have provided greater balance.

Overall, this book strikes a lively mix of scholarly substance, prophetic imagination, and pastoral wisdom. At times, the authors take a hard-hitting, no-nonsense stance toward the church. However, this posture is clearly rooted in an authentic love for Christ’s church, an earnest desire to see it characterized by vitality and integrity, and a sincere confidence in the Gospel’s ongoing relevance among today’s emerging generations. The authors are to be commended for placing their treatment of ministry to these generations within an intergenerational context. Even though they often vigorously challenge the members of older generations in the church, they also consistently address the intergenerational complexities of congregational life with thoughtfulness and sensitivity.

This book will be a stimulating read for any ministry leader concerned about the church’s efforts to impact young adults today. The discussion questions outlined at the end of each chapter also help make this a readily-accessible resource for church leaders to read and discuss together. Though readers might not resonate with everything they encounter in this book, *Not Safe for Church* will certainly help its readers to think differently. It may very well inspire them to forge ahead into new territory in response to the call of God.